

# Making a Moment

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He didn't mean to see it.

At least once a week, sometimes twice or thrice if they have the extra time, Dipper and Mabel load up on the biggest, cheapest, sugary-est bags of gas station candy (the off-brand, off-color ones that have misspellings in the name), pour those just-barely-edibles into a giant bowl, fill up the gaps with freshly popped far-too-buttery microwave popcorn, squirt some chocolate syrup all over the top, then mix it all up and chow down. The concoction is vile; neither of them had admitted to actually liking it, but by the end of the night every morsel of the gross salty-buttery-sweet-candy slurry is gone.

They don't *just* eat what 9 out of 10 clergy members would describe as a mortal sin. They sit together on an old sofa, reclaimed from a thrift store and thrown into her dorm room after hours of scrubbing it clean, and place her laptop onto the coffee table in front of them after setting up an hours-long movie playlist. Sometimes it's films they want to watch, most of the time it isn't, but either way they spend their time eating and riffing and laughing.

It was a habit that grew out of their desire to stay close. Their separate majors and heavy workloads in both meant they spent less and less time together; in high school, they shared so many classes and had the same homework, but now there was little help Dipper can offer in any of Mabel's art and psychology classes, and Mabel has little to no tolerance for hanging around Dipper while he's seven textbooks deep into a math or science project. Add in school clubs, new friends, and part time jobs, they were away from each other for increasingly longer lengths of time. By their second semester, one of them (or both of them, he couldn't remember exactly) had broken down and admitted they missed the other, so they came up with these nights where they made sure they had no obligations and had uninterrupted Twin Time. They accepted no excuse from each other—there was no getting out of Twin Time days, no matter how much homework they had, no matter how tired they were.

Twin Time days had quickly become the days he looked forward to the most. More than pay days, holidays, test days (he was always the kind of nerd that enjoyed tests), Twin Time days were the oil that kept him running during the times when his workload felt like

too much, the times when he worried if he was overextending himself. It was there on the ratty old couch, with his sister next to him and a bowl of awful terror in their laps as they watched movie after terrible movie, that he felt safest, the most grounded. And it helped that they always had this time alone. Mabel had a roommate, and one she liked profusely, describing her as ‘a real fun-time gal!’ but he had to take her word for it because after all this time he had never seen her once. She was always out, at a friends or partying or some other thing, but it was just as well because they never had to worry about (not) inviting her to their movie sessions.

It meant they got to stay in this comfortable void, with no interruptions or any outside world at all. He had never worried about the two of them growing apart, not really, but it was in these moments that he felt the most sure. He could sit there on that sofa and feel her arm leaning against his, her long brown hair spilling over his shoulder as it cushioned her head, and know they would always be alright.

And if some strange, unfamiliar feeling bubbled up, as it had started to every time one of these nights occurred, something powerful and smothering, something that squeezed his chest and squirmed in his gut, well, he’d just make those bubbles pop, and rip away the tendrils wrapped around his heart. That was the purpose of Twin Time days: to set aside a universe of non-sibling things and just be brother and sister for a few hours. It would be irresponsible to let something else creep in, especially something as alien and threatening as whatever’s been trying to burst out of him.

And obviously it was alien. It was something not of this world, completely beyond his ken. He could sit and think for weeks, months, YEARS, deep in meditation with his throat in constant chant, and never enlighten himself on the strange invader that crowded up his insides, that cluttered up his thoughts, clogging them with obsessions over details he’d never thought he’d notice, over wonderings he’d never thought he’d have. He’d noticed, from his arm stretched out on the back of the sofa, how silky her hair felt on the skin of his bicep, and wondered if it felt as smooth when flowing through his fingers. He relished in the warmth he stole from her sides and thought about how much more he could take if he scooped her up and wrapped his arms around her waist. He’d watch her eat a handful of The Sinful Stuff leaving chocolate-candy-sugar stains around her mouth, and he’d think about much better it would taste if sampled off her lips.

Yes, the feeling was completely impossible to understand. Especially when one tried their hardest not to, like he did.

It was best just to ignore. Occasionally the monster that had hitched itself to him would be particularly forceful, would overheat his mind into a haze that sometimes made Mabel worry, but those times were rare, rare enough that he was sure he could handle it no matter how long he was symptomatic. And he would handle it, forever and a day, because one thing he definitely knew about it was that it was dangerous. And while he can’t protect Mabel, his twin sister and his best friend, from all dangers, he could protect her from this one, and all it would take was doing nothing.

Of course, that all changed when he saw it.

He didn't mean to see it.

After one decidedly long week, all the stresses of school, work, and life seemed to pile up especially hard on Mabel, enough that she had texted him that she was cancelling Twin Time day so she get in a few sorely needed Z's. Unfortunately for her she had long ago agreed, just like he had, that if one of them were to try and cancel the other was allowed to forcefully set it up anyway. By any means necessary. She was usually the one who took advantage of that particular part of the agreement, so he took special care to enjoy it now that the tables were turned. He 'agreed' to cancel it, which probably set off her suspicions, but she was exhausted enough that she had fallen asleep anyway.

That was why when he showed up half an hour later, broke into her dorm, kicked open her room, and started blowing his emergency air horn (she had gotten both of them one for such an occasion, since they agreed this counted as an emergency) while yelling "MABEL MABEL MABEL" over and over and pounding her wall, she fell off her bed screaming, pulling the covers with her. She ended up getting stuck in them for a good while, fighting against their wicked binding, and he heard some part of her leg slam painfully against a section of her bedframe. He winced internally, but it was brief, drowned in a cheery delight—he rarely got the upper hand on Mabel in such a brazen manner. He imagined this was how Mabel felt whenever she did this kind of thing to him; no wonder she did it so often. He blew the air horn a few more times.

After watching her try to escape for a few pathetic seconds he took pity on her and helped her untangle, tugging at her blankets while she leveraged herself out of them. Once she was free she picked herself up off the ground, rubbing her knee and mumbling g-rated curses. He was pretty sure he heard the word "rassafrassin'," if that counted as a word. He threw her sheets back on the bed and gave her an innocent smile, then asked, "You sleep well?"

She stood there glaring at him, with her lips pursed and her eye scrunched together, trying to burn his eyebrows away or maybe melt his nose off. He imagined she was attempting to look angry and intimidating, but he thought back to all the times the roles were reversed and what she always told him whenever he looked at her that way, and he couldn't help but agree: it was actually just adorable. Her hair was mussed and frizzled, curling around her face in all directions haphazardly, she hadn't bothered to change out of her day-wear so her sweater was bunched up awkwardly, one of her socks was missing, probably stolen by the blankets. Adorable. Cute, even.

In a platonic sister way, of course.

"You butt! What the heck was that for?"

He held up the air horn and squawked out two quiet horns and said, "Twin Time. You know the rules."

He could tell she wanted to say something pretty badly, something like 'What the flippin' fudge is wrong with you' or 'Get outta here before I throw you out AND YOU KNOW I PHYSICALLY CAN,' but she'd been on the other side of the table enough to hold

her comments. They had promised that nothing would stop Twin Time, and she was a girl who kept her promises. That didn't mean she wouldn't grumble about it, and it *definitely* didn't mean she'd be more sympathetic to how he felt when she put him in the same position. No, she'd just get him back twice as hard next time, he was sure of it.

"Dipperrrrrr," she whined, "I'm tiirredd." She sat back on her bed and fell backward. "Mr. Sandman hit me with a dump truck. Just let me be burieeed." She covered her face in pillows, trying to let herself sink. Too bad her heroic brother was here to save her from the quicksand of proper sleep habits.

"Sorry, no can do. C'mon Mabel, I'll take off a bit earlier than usual so you can go to bed early, but that means we still have time for a couple of movies." He really let the sadness tinge his voice, and when she peaked out through the gaps of her cushions he gave her a silly pout. Being Mabel was fun, he should try it more often.

"...But what about the Dippercorn?" That was what she called their snack, but he had always refused to use the name because she was just as responsible for that abomination as he was.

"What about the Mabelcorn?" he asked for clarification.

"Well, I'm definitely not gettin' up any time soon to get the ingredients for *Dippercorn*."

He put on his tough-thinkin' face. "Hm, I guess that *is* kind of a problem. If only there was *someone* who already solved it..." He poked back outside Mabel's room and grabbed some bags he had placed there just before he ambushed her, holding them out to her. They were filled with candy, though the good stuff this time since he figured she'd need it, as well as a few boxes of popcorn.

It took her a minute to throw off the pillows and examine the bags, but as she did her mouth slowly pulled into a big smile. It didn't quite reach her tired eyes all the way, but it was still toothy and genuine, and he preferred that simple smile to all the easy joy he got from teasing her.

"Look, I'll go mix this stuff up, and you just set up your laptop. You don't even have to pick the movies if you don't want."

"...Can we do it in here? Otherwise you're gonna have to carry me to the sofa, and I don't wanna hurt your precious noodle arms."

"Hey, I've been working out! They're not noodles anymore."

She snorted. "Is working out what you call doing 5 pushups a day?"

"All the fitness experts agree you have to start off slow!"

A smug grin replaced her happy one. Looks like she's already paying him back. "But they *did* say you should actually start, right? You should do that, brobro."

"Just set up your computer, Mabels. I'm gonna go get the bowl."

“Wait!”

He looked back at her questioningly.

“Can you hand me my laptop? It’s in my bag, and I don’t wanna get up. Maybe ever.”

He took it out and tossed it on the bed, and started to leave again.

“Wait!”

He looked back at her with a roll of his eyes.

“Can you also open it and turn it on and set it up?”

He stared at her for a few seconds, but just left the room with the candy-filled bags, hearing her exclaim a ‘blaarrgh’ as pulled herself back up to grab her computer.

Her dorm room didn’t have a kitchen, unless a small refrigerator and single microwave counted as a kitchen, but she still had a collection of plates and bowls for quick microwaved meals and leftovers from the campus dining hall. He popped the popcorn in the microwave and took out the gigantic bowl they had designated for Mabelcorn use, their shame etched into its inside surface in the form of multicolored candy stains and old butter residue. He poured the popcorn and the bags of gummy candy into it, and grabbed a few sodas from the fridge when he took out Mabel’s bottle of chocolate syrup and drizzled it over the mess in the bowl. He shook it all up and ‘admired’ the finished product. It looked awful, it smelled even worse, and made him feel kind of sick inside. Guess it was ready.

When he entered back into her room, he saw her face lit up by her computer screen as she sat up in her bed, lying against a huge pile of pillows. Her eyes were closed, but the way her leg was fidgeting he could tell she hadn’t fallen back asleep, so he didn’t have to bring out Ol’ Airhorny again. He turned off the lights and closed the door, officially shutting themselves off from the world, and climbed into her bed, sitting next to her and putting the bowl between his legs. He could feel her instantly lean over and snuggle into his side and his heart started to beat faster, thumping against his chest almost painfully. Looked like today was gonna be a more aggressive day for his little alien friend. Nothing he hadn’t dealt with before.

He saw that her browser was already open to their usual streaming site but with nothing playing yet, so he searched for some straight to TV murder mystery movie he heard had an interesting twist but an uninteresting everything else. He read off the summary to her so she’d have a bit of context, but all he got was a small nod in return. He figured he wouldn’t get too much more out of her, so he put the sodas aside on her dresser and started up the movie, leaning back against her pillow pile for comfort.

It was a much quieter affair than usual, due to Mabel’s exhaustion. She didn’t fully fall asleep though, since he kept her up with dumb jokes and frustrated comments, and there were a few points where she got into it like she usually did. They found the murder victim’s body in a vat of crayon wax, and they had a long exchange of made up crayon color names based on murder puns. After one of the suspects turned out to be a maligned crayon

sculpture artist, Mabel gave a short rant about how the movie was demonizing innocent crayon enthusiasts. And when the real killer turned out to be a marker factory owner trying to shut down the crayon factory, they both groaned out loud. He wasn't sure which part of that was supposed to be the interesting twist, but he felt cheated either way.

He paid much less attention to the next movie, and the same was probably true for Mabel. She was even quieter, short breaths indicating her wakefulness, but she was otherwise out of it. To the few comments he made, she just hummed softly and drooped a little more against his side. And really, that was fine. These days weren't always about silly fun; sometimes it was just about close company, no matter how reserved, so that was what he relished. At some point his arm had wrapped around her and pulled her closer, and he figured that was probably okay enough. Maybe less okay was the way his fingers had started to play in her hair, twisting her locks and rubbing the side of her head, but there was nothing explicitly weird about that. Right? At the very least, the way she would press her head back against his hand implied that she enjoyed the completely platonic gesture.

By the time the second movie was over she was gone. Not completely asleep yet, but only technically—she was hanging on by a thread, keeping a thin line of awareness wrapped around the world, and specifically around Dipper. Once he left she'd be out. He decided to end the night there, since she probably did need the sleep.

So he gave her a small squeeze before extracting himself from her bed, shifting her form carefully so that she was lying down properly. He removed the bowl of Mabelcorn, only half empty since Mabel wasn't energetic enough to eat her usual 75%, and placed her laptop on her desk. He tucked her into her blankets and she burrowed deep inside them, really cozying up, and for a second he considered leaning over her and kissing her forehead, but that was a move much easier for her to pull off than him.

Instead he just got close and whispered, "Good night, Mabel. Thanks for doing this."

She mumbled out what might have been "G'nt, thnks," unable to get out the vowels. He also heard her saying "'puter", which he figured meant computer, possibly telling him to make sure it's turned off.

"I'll turn it off for you." She nodded imperceptibly.

He watched her sleep for a few seconds, letting the thing inside him foam and gurgle even though he knew he shouldn't, but eventually turned toward her computer. She was the kind of person to press the power button and let the computer remind her of all the things she needed to save, but he was always closed everything manually first. And as he was closing out open programs, the word processor he tried to quit asked him to save an open file.

And that was why he saw it.

He didn't mean to see it.

Really, it was the programs fault. When the save prompt popped up, it filled the screen with the file in question. He never asked for it, he didn't try to look at it, it was FORCED on him without his input. He wasn't the kind of person to just go looking through people's stuff. But he looked at this, and he really really didn't mean to.

He clicked 'save' and closed it quickly, but by then the damage was done. His eyes picked up a few specific words, grokked a few specific sentences even if he didn't get the whole context, but the slivers of meaning he managed to understand pounded at his head. It hammered away as he finished closing up programs and finally turned her laptop off, it made skull throb as he finished cleaning their leavings and grabbed up all his stuff. It blurred his focus as he left her dorm and locked the door before it closed, it made him dizzy as he sprinted back to his own room, and it didn't abate until he got himself into his room and collapsed onto his bed, where he could finally relax and freak out in private.

It seemed to be some kind of journal entry, maybe even a blog post. As far as he knew, Mabel didn't keep anything like that, though that might be one of the few secrets she'd have, since that's the point of secret journals. A lot of the words his eyes picked out were things like 'hard to deal with' and 'heart beating' and 'always on my mind.' Sounded like primo journal material. There were other bits like that, it was a lengthy document, but really, his mind was stuck on the very first line, the six words that started the entry.

*"I'm in love with my brother."*

What could they mean!?!?

Surely it was a metaphor, or something like that. An allegory. That was a thing, right? It was an allegory for the indomitable spirit of man.

No. *Why the hell would it be that?*

It was probably just a short story or something. Mabel's artistic talents laid mostly in physical crafts, but there was nothing stopping her from flexing her writer's muscles. He never really imagined her having the discipline to sit at a screen for hours typing, but maybe it was a first attempt? Yeah, it could be that. And just like lots of writers, she would draw from real life. That was why he saw his own name written down multiple times throughout the piece, and in the header, and in the file name. Makes perfect sense. It CERTAINLY couldn't be about him for real, since he also saw the words 'handsome' and 'cute butt' at least once each.

*I cannot even handle this right now.*

Which was too bad, because he knew he wasn't getting to sleep any time soon. Even if it wasn't a genuine and private declaration of feelings far too complicated to express out loud, writing about being in love with your real life brother and saying his butt was cute probably meant something regardless. You can't do it ironically.

Inside him, the bubbles frothed and boiled.

He was almost choking on them. They were filling up his chest, his stomach, his head. His blood was surging, less room in his veins for his cells so they pushed through that much harder. He shut his eyes and put his hands over his ears, sure that if he kept them open something would spume out. He was on the cusp of something and he was terrified of what.

*... Do I feel the same way?*

He almost slapped himself, and only didn't because his hand was busy keeping the bubbles from pouring out. Of course he did. He couldn't think the things he'd been thinking, he couldn't have to assure himself so often that his gestures are platonic, and not know something was up. He wasn't THAT dumb, probably. But until he had seen the words 'in love' written there, at the top of her note, he had honestly thought himself much baser. He had seen a pattern to the things that stuck in his mind. It was hard to ignore that the thoughts he had to push away tended toward the physical: how soft her lips looked, how soft her legs looked, how soft... well, lots of softness. The point was, he was kinda thinking he was just some awful deviant.

But it had always been more than that, really. He could push away his physical fascinations so easily because none of them were as important as the warmth he felt when she was tucked under his arm, or the way she eased his worries by simply being around. The way they laughed, joked, teased. The way they always missed each other, no matter how short their time apart. He could make a list of all the things he loved about Mabel (and he probably would at some point), but it never occurred to him that it could mean something beyond typical brother-sister emotions. Clearly, some pretty important wires were crossed. And she maybe felt the same way...!

*God, this is sick.*

Well, if he was sick, then he had company. He'd always felt he and Mabel were more similar than people gave them credit for, but he didn't think it'd go this far.

So the question was, what was he going to do about this? What was he supposed to do?

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He stayed up for hours, until the sun started peeking through the slits in his blinds. *Whoops*. He was either going to skip class or have one of the most miserable days of his college life.

Two things he knew for sure though: one night of thinking wouldn't be enough to really figure himself out, and a thousand wouldn't be enough either. Maybe for any other girl, for any other situation, but not for this. He also didn't want to assume too much about the note he'd read off her computer. It was still a big deal, but maybe she was working through some things and that was how she did it. But after thinking for so long, he had a plan of action, or something like one.



Obviously he couldn't just TALK to her about it. No, that was no good for anyone. The problem was, they cared about each other too much. If one of them confessed their feelings, the other would accept those feelings completely, unconditionally, no matter what they personally felt. Even if they had confessed back, who could be certain they did it sincerely, and not because they wanted to make the first person happy? No, by being honest with each other, they would assure that they could never really know what their true feelings were.

It was perfectly logical, when you thought about it.

No, this needed something extra. It had to be more than words, because words are tricky and nebulous. They always mean other things. No he needed something that was obvious and clear. He needed... *a Moment*.

Moments were always straightforward. In all those sappy romance movies Mabel had made him watch, especially ones where two best friends fell in love (the frame of reference he used, since he was pretty sure there was no rubric for siblings), there were always circumstances or events where the protagonists looked into each other's eyes and their hidden emotions finally became clear. If whatever was going on between the two of them was meant to happen, that was how it had to happen, if only because he couldn't imagine any series of words that would get them to the same spot.

But more than that... Mabel deserved something like that. Dipper wasn't a romantic kind of person, but she was. The few relationships he'd had before, he started by asking a casual 'Hey, wanna date?' and they responded with something like 'Sure, I guess.' That worked for some people, but definitely not for Mabel. If things somehow developed between the two of them, he wanted it to happen in a way she would always think about fondly, and also he was completely terrified of the concept of asking his freaking sister out in any capacity.

They needed a Moment, or at least the opportunity for one. So he'd make sure they'd have one. He'd worry about everything else after.

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## Operation Pillow Fight

**Summary:** While spending time together, one of them will say an annoying comment that will trigger an irritated response in the other. The second person will physically aggress the first in a playful manner, who will respond in kind, and they will escalate the encounter until one of them ends up on top of the other. They will look each other in the eyes, and a Moment will happen.

**Step 1: Set up some kind of light, physical activity they can do indoors, in close reach of pillows.**

He'd heard of a hundred stories where two already close protagonists with repressed romantic feelings get into a small scuffle and the close but otherwise non-romantic contact would turn into intimacy, and they'd stare longingly into each other's eyes before kissing. It was Romance 101. It was true that usually they'd get interrupted at that point by something contrived, but that was just how stories worked. It was different in real life. He just had to create a situation where it would happen.

Their schedules were generally very busy, but if they tried hard enough they could set up some time for themselves, separate from Twin Time (he wanted to keep those days out of this, since they were special and sacred). He only needed a few hours, instead of the full evening and night that Twin Time usually took, and that was something they could manage.

He also thought something that would get them moving, get their hearts pumping a bit, would make for the easiest path to something like a pillow fight. When they were younger they play-wrestled all the time, but it wasn't exactly a common occurrence nowadays. If he can prime the idea of physicality beforehand, then the transition should be much more natural.

So a couple of days after the night that changed everything, he texted her and asked if she wanted to play some video games. Don't worry, he's got this.

**Step 2: Do said activity and have fun doing it, preferably while embarrassing themselves.**

She said yes, so he packed up his stuff and headed over, going over the plan along the way, hoping to build up his confidence. It ended up making him more nervous, since it gave him more time to wonder what the hell he was doing and how badly this could all turn out, but his feet kept moving toward Mabel regardless.

He didn't have to break in this time since she was awake and welcoming, although when she opened the door she did it with an air horn blast to his face. It scared him enough that he jumped backward and fell down on his butt, almost falling on his backpack full of video game stuff but catching himself on his hands. He glared at her, and she smiled at him, and he wondered if she thought he was adorable right then.

“Hey Dip. You sleep well?”

“That doesn’t even make sense right now! We’re both wide awake.”

“Uumm, then maybe I’m just genuinely asking if my baby brother is going to bed at a proper time? SORRY for being a good sister.”

He grumbled at her as he got up and tried not to think about karma. “I dunno, I think a good sister would’ve given her brother a hug when she saw him, but I just feel all cold and lonely over here. Also my butt hurts.”

“Well I’m pretty sure that second thing is your fault, but I’ve got a fix for that first one.” And with that she pulled him into a hug, throwing her chin over his shoulder. Even as college students she was still exactly 1 millimeter taller than him, but that just meant their hugs always matched. The small patch of hair on his chin rubbed against her hair and he remembered what he was here for.

They broke apart and he headed in, setting down his bag near the sofa and unpacking his stuff.

“Whoa, I didn’t know you were bringing a whole store with you.” She took a closer look at the stuff inside his pack. “Waitamminute... did you steal all this stuff?”

“Why would you think I stole it?”

“Because it’s a buncha loose electronics in a backpack, Dipper, that’s stealing 101! Grunkle Stan taught us better than that.” She shook her head in disapproval.

“You can’t be suggesting that Grunkle Stan would be upset with me stealing anything.”

“So you admit it! Are you here because you’re hidin’ from Johnny Law? I’ll keep you safe, brobro.” She gave him a pat on his shoulder, as if to assure him. “Also, I meant that Grunkle Stan literally taught us better ways to steal than that. Next time you’re gonna steal stuff just ask me to lend you one of my really big sweaters, those are WAY less suspicious! And WAY more fashionable!”

“I didn’t steal any of it! Most of it’s borrowed, actually.”

“Borrowed from the store, maybe! Without permission! Cuz you stole it!”

She poked him the end of each sentence, so he swatted her hand away and set up the equipment he brought on the table.

“What’s that?” She was looking at a box with a big lens he had sat next to the console.

“It’s a projector. I borrowed it from Campus IT.”

“You don’t have to keep saying borrowed, Dipper.”

“I didn’t steal it! I filled out a form and everything. Do you wanna see my copy?”

“What’s it for?” she asked, completely ignoring his question.

“Well, in case you forgot, you don’t own a TV.”

“Oh yeah! Huh.”

“And I didn’t want to carry mine over, so I got this. It should be way cooler anyway.”

“Neat! I’ve always wanted a TV made of light. It’s the closest I can get to touching a rainbow!”

“Well I do have to return it, so don’t get used to it.”

“Why are you gonna return it? Did you forget what stealing was again?”

“I DIDN’T STEAL IT.”

She could keep him trapped in this loop for hours if she wanted, so he broke away and shifted the furniture around so that the projector could face a wall but still leave them plenty of empty room on the floor. His setup wasn’t completely finished.

He took out two folded up sheets of cloth and plastic, each one with a long cord extending out of it. He plugged in those cords to the game console and unfolded the sheets, which were laid out with arrows facing up, down, left, and right, and when she saw them she gasped out loud.

“DANCE DANCE REMIXOLUTION PADS! Where’d you get those puppies?!”

“My roommate’s friend’s sister’s cousin’s girlfriend owns these,” he said, counting out the thread of people on his hand. “I asked my roommate to ask to borrow them, and I borrowed them from him.”

She spent a little time trying to work out what he said, but eventually realized she didn’t care. “AAAHH! You shoulda said we were gonna dance dance today! You made me think we were gonna play nerdy games! And I thought you didn’t like this game that much?”

“Eh, I don’t I guess. But you do. And I wanted this to be a little surprise.”

“Aw, you sweet sweet dweebus.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and even though he knew SOMETHING was up with the two of them he still felt kind of pathetic for enjoying it as much as he did.

After a little more setup they had the projector and game console running, dance pads set up for each of them, heavy techno-pop music blaring out of the projectors speakers. He took off his shoes, since the leather would probably tear right through the plastic sheets, and they both took off their socks, since they didn’t want any slipping. He noticed her toenails were painted a light glitter-purple, and he joked that she was cheating by trying to reflect light into his eyes.

“I could paint yours up to make it even!” she offered. He shook his head at her morosely. “Poor Dipper’s toes, they just wanna be fabulous.”

He let her pick the first song and she went for one of the fastest, hardest ones. Not that it mattered since he wasn't very good at any of them. Not that THAT mattered, because he wasn't there to win at video games (this time).

It went predictably, with Mabel demolishing him in score, but they were laughing the whole time. They switched off who picked the song and when they got tired of picking they let the game choose randomly. He fell down a couple of times, though he was cushioned by the carpet, and every time she giggled at him, and every time he kicked at her shins.

They played for a few hours but after a while Mabel got tired of having to dance on the pad. They would still start a song but she'd dance on her own, following made up arrows instead of the ones projected on the wall, throwing her arms around and kicking her legs out. It was probably the most ungraceful dancing he'd ever seen but he couldn't help but watch her, and sometimes join in on the fun.

Soon the pads were kicked away but they kept moving, having a silly dance party to the soundtrack of aggressive Japanese techno, Mabel occasionally grabbing his hands to lead him in multiple rounds of nonsensical boogying. Dipper had to sit down more than once since his strenuous workout routine hadn't incorporated leg exercises yet, but Mabel never slowed. She always had energy to burn, and was more than willing to burn it on this.

It took some time but eventually she collapsed into the sofa next to him, leaning into the collection of pillows decorating it, breathing hard and giggling. She had a layer of perspiration on her skin, and he would like to say she was glistening, but she was just regular ol' sweaty. He wasn't better off, but no version of him could pull off glistening anyway. He handed her a bottle of water he'd grabbed earlier, and she gulped at it greedily. They settled down a bit, talking about their favorite DDR songs and which dance moves they'd invented they thought could catch on, and he felt the mood was right to move on to the next step.

### **Step 3: Provoke her into a tussle, or let himself be provoked if she starts it.**

Given their dynamic he was expecting the latter, but for the first time in a long while she was too tired for teasing. He could tease her himself, but as he'd learned recently, he far preferred her goofy smile to her adorable glare, and little made her smile more than annoying him. He'd have to lead her into it. Luckily for him Mabel was predictable, at least about some things, about this. He could make this happen in his sleep.

"So, you havin' fun?" he asked her.

She gave him a bright smile. "The most fun! I get to party down AND kick your butt at something while doing it!" She elbowed his side tauntingly.

She really made this too easy. "Hey c'mon! I was getting better. Pretty sure if I kept playing I could've become a dance *expert*."

"Practice all you want Dip, you'll never beat the QUEEN OF DANCING!"

"I—"

"It's me, I'm the Queen of Dancing! Me, Mabel, did you get that??"

"Yes I got it! And anyway, you can't *win* at dancing, that's not how it works."

"The score counter says otherwise, Dance Fool!"

"It says zero! We haven't actually played in an hour."

"Doesn't matter! Sorry Dip, there's just no way those things you call dance moves could ever unseat the QUEEN."

"...Did you just imply I can't dance?" he asked while narrowing his eyes comically.

She put on an arrogant smile. "You need me to say it out loud, jelly-legs? You..." She poked his chest with a finger.

"Don't say it."

"Can't." Poke

"Don't you DARE."

"DANCE." Poke.

He grabbed a pillow and swung it at her, thumping it against the side of her head. The momentum carried it across her face and back to his side, and the two of them sat there quietly for a few seconds. A look of disbelief slowly crawled across her features.

"...Did you just...?" Her jaw was open wide, only mostly exaggerated.

"I just."

"Oh NO you DIDN'T."

"I did."

She stared at him for a bit longer, her face shifting into a mask of aggrieved challenge.

"You realize this means war, right?" she asked, her voice dark and ominous.

"Bring it on."

*Nailed it.*

#### **Step 4: FIGHT.**

With his final taunt she gained a second wind, grabbing a pillow in each hand and throwing a flurry of blows at him. He leapt away from her off the couch, desperate to get away from her initial assault, and didn't realize his mistake until afterward. He only had the one pillow in hand, against her two; already she had an advantage, and he knew she knew it.

She pressed that advantage and tried to pin him in a corner, holding her weapons out threateningly. He feinted a few attacks, testing for weakness, but she didn't even flinch. She just moved closer and closer, stone-faced and ready for the kill. He had to do something desperate, and fast.

He waited a few breaths, letting her get closer, keeping an eye on the pillows she had started to spin around like flails. Amateur move—that left her face unguarded. After she got close enough to pincer him with a dual strike, he chucked his pillow directly at her face. It caught her off guard; she closed her eyes and squawked out a 'BLAAH,' and he used the brief distraction to scuttle past her, flipping her hair over her head as he did.

He reached the sofa again and rearmed himself as he heard her yell out "THAT'S FIGHTIN' DIRTY!" He turned back toward her and saw her trying to maneuver her hair back in place while still holding her cushions.

"Hey, all's fair in l-love and war." He wasn't sure which one this was.

"Well I'm definitely gonna LOVE pounding the STUFFING outta ya!"

He tossed his pillows at her and reloaded, but she was ready for those, deflecting them handily. She went for a straightforward assault, dropping all the intimidation, and he decided to drop his tricks and follow suit. The next few minutes became a simple affair of hit volleys and small retreats, and it didn't take long for their faux seriousness to devolve into laughter and giggles. After she almost tripped over the table still holding the game console and projector, they called a timeout while they moved it out of the way, though she prematurely called it back in before he could get ready and got in a few cheap shots. She managed to knock away his pillows, but on a particularly telegraphed swing he caught one of hers as it was going toward his face and they tussled over it tug of war style.

She got in a few jabs at his side with her other hand while he tried to force the pillow they were both holding into her face in a 'stop hitting yourself' kind of way. They stumbled around, each of them wrenching at the pillow, trying to get the upper hand, but they were too evenly matched.

He needed to end this. Dipper went for one last pull, yanking the cushion as hard as he could without worrying about staying upright. It threw her off enough that they both flew backward, but it worked out well enough, because they had accidentally positioned themselves so that he was right in front of the sofa, and they landed on it clumsily.

### **Step 5: Fall on top of each other.**

It could not have been more serendipitous. He hit kind of hard, his back thumping audibly against the sofa, but the collection of pillows still stacked on the seats made the collision softer. And because Mabel had been so close she fell on top of him with a grunt, and the sight and feel of her sitting on him was suddenly the only thing he could focus on.

She had managed to catch herself on her hands, now on either side of his head, one still holding a pillow. Her face was close enough to his that he could feel the warmth of her panting breath and smell the salt of her skin mixed with the mango-passionfruit scent of her soap. Her hair was messy and tangled, his fault, but it gave her a sweet, wild look that gripped his heart and squeezed. Her skin was damp with sweat, but now that the projector was farther away the light it was casting on them was much softer, more of a glow, and hey wouldja look at that, it made her glisten.

He stared at her for what had to be less than a handful of seconds but every tick seemed to take years, and it still wasn't enough to figure out if the thing he was looking for was in her eyes. Far quicker than that, a creeping terror crawled its way into his brain, dissolving the foam that had frothed up when they collapsed onto the couch.

*Oh god oh god what am I doing did I seriously try to set up a way to kiss my sister oh god am I gonna have to start it what if she doesn't go for it what if she DOES I can't I CANT.*

The fear built up faster than any hope could, a curse of his if there ever was one, and if he saw a slow motion capture of his face he would expect to see a very clear graduation of panic develop in his eyes. He could be in psychology textbooks. But like always, all it took was a single word from Mabel to wash it away.

"Dipper?"

It shoved his mind back into sharp focus, and he saw two brown orbs staring back at him, kind and happy. They had been looking at him the whole time, but he only really SAW them after she spoke. They were beautiful, and loving, and safe, and it may have been an illusion but he was certain he could see himself in them.

The two of them stared for a second or two longer, and he knew he had to do something, and he knew there was only one thing he wanted to do. He started leaning toward her.

### **Step 6: Have a Moment.**

Unfortunately, the one thing Dipper forgot was that Mabel doesn't go halfway when goofing around. Ignorant to the storm inside his head, she had taken their stare down, the fear in his eyes, his slow movement toward her, as a last stand on his part, because instead of responding by also leaning in and meeting his lips, she cranked her arm back and swung the pillow into his head, HARD.

It knocked him clean over, laying him across the length of the couch. She shifted her own position to make them parallel again, and began to absolutely wail on him, raining down blow after blow, mostly on his face, though she got a few good hits on his arms and chest.

"Ow! OW! MABEL, TOO HARD! TOO HARD!" His hands were up over his face trying to block the onslaught but that just seemed to encourage her.



“Oh I’m sorry, did you think this was a pillow fight? I told you Dip, this is a PILLOW WAR!”

She threw him a few more blows, really laying into him, and whatever he thought was building up withered away.

She accepted his formal surrender.

### **Operation Pillow Fight: Failed**

After she calmed down a bit she did apologize for being a bit too rough, but he could tell she was more proud than contrite. He played up his offense, acting as if she had seriously affronted him, until she caved in and gave him a conciliatory hug. It wasn’t exactly the moment he was hoping for, but he enjoyed it nonetheless.

It had gotten late enough for dinner, so they microwaved a few quick meals, sharing off each other’s plates, but afterward Dipper started packing up his stuff. It was never meant to be an all-day affair anyhow. After he collected all his things, they said their goodbyes, and he headed back to his room.

*Well, that plan was a bust.*

He wasn’t deterred, though. At the very least, the few seconds he got looking into her eyes cleared a few things up for him. He was definitely in love. But he didn’t get any kind of read on her, except that she takes pillow fights incredibly seriously. The note she wrote didn’t stop being a thing, but she hadn’t responded to their situation. Maybe it was just a fluke. Maybe he just needed to try something else.

Inside him, a few of the bubbles popped.

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## **Operation Swimming Pool**

**Summary:** He’ll suggest an outing at the pool (the outdoor one specifically), and they’ll make a day of it. After some time spent splashing around (making sure to avoid excessive physical confrontation; he’s learned his lesson there), they’ll calm down and relax near each other. The serene setting of the pool combined with their more relaxed state of dress will set the mood, and they’ll look into each other’s eyes and have a Moment. For real this time.

### **Step 1a: Set up a free day.**

This time his plan necessitated more of the day, from the afternoon onward. Not that they’ll spend literally all that time at the pool; it was more cunning than that. But he needed time for the both of them, and it was in somewhat short supply.

A few days after the Pillow Fight Incident the weekend hit, and he figured that would be the best time to work for. Sundays were their Twin Time days, so he aimed for Saturday. He managed to get the day off from work, but things on Mabel's end were more complicated.

He threw out the idea to her the day after pillow fight day, so that he could calibrate as needed. From what she had told him her week was going to stay busy, but he knew if he had to delay his plan he'd lose whatever confidence was keeping him running. No, he didn't want to wait another week, or longer. This required drastic measures.

He offered to help with her homework. She was taking a Fashion Design class, and she was always in need of a model.

It took him longer than he'd like to admit to type the offer out into his phone. He honestly did love listening to her talk about her coursework—there's an element of science and math in clothing design he'd never known about and she was more than happy to tell him all about it—but *taking part* was another matter entirely. Especially with Mabel; there's a reason she had trouble finding willing participants to act as mannequins. She tended to require a lot out of them.

Ultimately, it was something he was sure he could handle, especially if he could lighten her workload. That gave the double benefit of getting them a free day for the pool, and making her week easier in general. So once he sent his text, she replied back seconds later with a frankly irresponsible number of happy face emoticons, and they scheduled some time to get it done.

### **Step 1b: Help with Mabel's Homework.**

He managed to finish up all of his homework, mostly by staying up a bit later than he should, but it left him with the free time to head over to Mabel's dorm every day after Pillow Fight day and act as a clothing/posing mannequin for her current project. She would wrap clothes in various states of completion on him, measuring out cuts and lengths, marking down needed adjustments, taking lots of reference photos. He made her promise she'd only take pictures of the dresses from his neck down, and that she'd never show them to anyone other than her professors, but he knew she wouldn't keep it.

She would talk about what she was going for as she worked, and he tried his best to understand, but a lot of her explanations slid off his mind like dew off a lotus leaf. She was always so animated when she spoke about it though, like he was when he talked about science and cryptography, so he couldn't help but feed off her excitement. It was all the same passion she had toward her art projects when she was younger, but more focused and refined. Before they had started college she worried that she'd have trouble adjusting to university expectations, but she took to them wonderfully. He was proud of her.

Though it did mean he had to stand there unmoving for a few hours while she ‘expressed’ herself on him. Every fidget had her tutting him, threatening that if he messed up any of the fabric it’d take her even longer to finish. It kept him still enough, usually, but sometimes when she measured something he’d feel her fingers run along bare patches of his skin and couldn’t help the tingles.

His assistance got her finished in record time, she’d said, though he didn’t think he did much at all. If anything he felt a bit greedy, since Mabel was doing all the work but he got all the benefit of her company. She seemed happy enough though, and was looking forward to their outing at the pool.

## **Step 2: Go to the pool.**

When that Saturday came and afternoon hit, they threw some clothes over their swimsuits and drove to the public pool. They shared van, a cheap, mangled one they scrounged together money for through part time high school jobs (and suped-up by Soos the first time they drove it to Gravity Falls), though Dipper was usually the designated driver. Mabel got distracted looking at pedestrians a little too often.

When they arrived they took off their outer layers of clothes and threw on some sunscreen, at Dipper’s insistence. He briefly considered trying to get a Moment out of applying sunscreen to each other, but she threw some on his back quickly on her own, and she didn’t need the help. Most of her was covered, in a sparkly light pink one piece with an attached skirt, but not for modesty’s sake—one piece just had more fabric to decorate. Hers was bright originally, but she had since waterproof-glued on all kinds of accoutrements: beads, fake gems, metal rings, even some googly eyes. When she moved, she jangled. She was quite the sight. Dipper looked downright pitiful next to her, all pale and noodly, in his comparatively dull Hawaiian-themed trunks covered in colorful flowers. She said she liked them anyway.

When they entered the pool area holding their towels, they found it pretty packed. Not so full that they couldn’t scout out an empty section for the two of them, but there were more than 2 lifeguards on duty and they were all pretty busy. There were toddlers running around, ignoring the rules and reaping the consequences when they slipped and fell (though they just laughed it off and kept running), a sprinkling of teens here and there, the ones not cool enough to hang out at graveyards, a few college students putting off their homework (he could just tell), a lot of older people playing with their kids, a handful of grandparents watching their grandkids. The chlorine nipped at his nostrils lightly but was drowned out by the stink of sunscreen and body odor and maybe even a little bit of urine.

It was definitely a public pool, no privacy to be seen, and certainly not the sort of place where any kind of intimacy could happen between two people who had hidden feelings for each other and also were siblings.

Perfect.

They found a spot in the pool to plant their flag, one with an unoccupied chair nearby where they could put their stuff. The water was crisp and cool, still carrying the bite of last night's chill, but they acclimatized quickly. They didn't go swimming often, but he had enjoyed it when they did. Mabel wasn't a particularly great swimmer, but something about the environment suited her (the feeling of floating, he thought), and his old lifeguard training kept most of his usual worries at bay. It relaxed him knowing he could save her if he had to.

They spent hours there, horsing around, seeing who could make the biggest splash without upsetting the lifeguards, racing around the gathering of older patrons floating about in pool tubes, letting some of the kids with squirt guns defeat them in epic pool battle. At some point they got drafted into a game of chicken fight with some classmates Mabel recognized from school, and she clambered onto his shoulders and he pretended he didn't have trouble holding her up.

They actually ended up winning all of their fights, but only because Mabel was just as aggressive there as she was during the pillow fight. When it comes to silly games, Mabel plays to win—he was just glad it wasn't directed at him this time. He was also pretty sure she made the sun reflect off some of the fake jewels on her suit into their opponents eyes, for real this time, but it's not like he was gonna bring that up. He found it impressive, if anything—maybe she WAS listening when he ranted about refraction angles.

When Mabel unofficially pronounced them the collective Chicken Fight Champions, the other combatants bowed genially and said their goodbyes. She praised Dipper for his maneuvering skills, calling him a “great lil’ sea-horsey”, and he tried to throw her off but she refused to be let go. She drove him back to the zone they had claimed, steering him with her fingers in his hair, and he tried not to let her know that he was more than happy keeping her on his shoulders.

It wasn't long after that they found themselves out of the pool, both of them squeezed into the single creaky chair after she wouldn't let him sit on a towel on the floor beside it. They lounged in the seat for a while in a comfortable silence, watching everyone else swim and letting the sun warm them gently. He decided it was a good time for the next part of the plan.

### **Step 3: Offer an alternative.**

“You know, I know we tend to be kinda busy and all, but we should try going swimming more often. It's fun,” he said as he turned to look at her.

“Hey, if you keep letting me put dresses and stuff on you I'd have enough time to go swimming every day!”

His cheeks flushed a little but he refused to be embarrassed. “Yeah yeah, make fun, you're the one who said I looked great.”

“I meant it! I'm not making fun. You were so pretty, Dipper! You should let me make you a dress for real. I could even put some nerdy science stuff on it if you want!”

"It's not really my thing, Mabel. But... thanks."

She beamed at him. "Will you still help me out sometimes? It really did make things go faster."

"... Maybe, if I can. I still don't understand how I could possibly be helping that much. All I did was stand around."

"Having you around is what made everything easier." Her lips curved upward sweetly, and nothing in the world could stop him from doing the same.

"So it's agreed then," she continued, "for every dress you put on, we get one day of swimming! That's the kind of math I like."

"I think we should hold off on that equation for now. Besides, I just said we should swim 'more often,' not 'every day.' I don't think I like it *THAT* much. Especially this time of year, there're just so many people."

*Take the bait take the bait please take the bait.*

"Yeah I get what you're droppin', brobro. When we were racing earlier I almost crashed into like, three old ladies. What if I ran into them and they had heart attacks or something?! I can't have that on my conscience, Dip, I'd break under the strain!"

"Yeah, if only we could go swimming, just the two of us."

"The whole pool to ourselves! We could rule with IRON FISTS!"

He went quiet for a while, as if he was working something out and hadn't had it planned for days. "You know... that's not exactly impossible." He gave her a sly look, really trying to communicate the idea of mischief with his eyes alone.

"... I'm listening." She gave him a curious glance back.

"Well, the pool eventually closes. And when it's closed, there're no people around. And pools aren't exactly known for heavy security."

She gasped dramatically. "Dipper! You can't possibly be suggesting what I think you're suggesting."

"I can neither confirm nor deny that I am suggesting what you think I'm suggesting."

"Oooh, lookit Mr. Bad Boy over here! What happened to responsible Assistant Lifeguard Dipper who protected his pool from ne'er-do-wells like me?"

"That Dipper died the day his whistle did." He gave a moment of silence to Assistant Lifeguard Dipper and his whistle, before throwing a smile back on his face. "So... what do you think?"

She gave a conspiratorial grin. "... What time does the pool close again?"

**Step 4: Break into the pool at night.**

They left just before evening hit, giving them plenty of time to plan their caper. They had dinner at an outdoor café and they used their extra utensils and sugar packets to map out nonexistent patrols and fake laser grids, preparing multiple imaginary contingencies for emergencies that would never happen. By the time they finished up their food they had a foolproof plan for breaking into a facility that didn't exist, but if they ever needed to infiltrate a pool guarded by snipers and robot dogs they would have few issues.

They spent a bit more time driving around town, but by the time it was dark and most of the stores had closed, dashboard clock glowing a time just after 10, they headed back to the pool.

It turned out that breaking into a pool was incredibly easy, even when you didn't have a key that opened any lock in America. Mabel had begged him not to use it since she wanted the thrill of vandalism, and once she picked a single lock on a single gate they had basically unfettered access. She was almost disappointed. There was a musty safety cover over the pool and the two of them had to spend some time untying it from its anchors, but once they rolled it up, the pool was all theirs.

Although, Mabel didn't wait that long. They had removed  $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of it when she jumped in screaming, and he halfheartedly told her to be quiet but the pool was remote enough, surrounded by park grass and an empty parking lot. He had to finish up rolling the cover himself but he didn't mind, since he got to watch her reign over the pool, throwing her energy around in large splashes that would've gotten them kicked out earlier and jumping in and out in what his lifeguard training would call 'an unsafe and inappropriate way.' None of the lights around the pool were on, but the moon- and starlight and their reflection off the water cast a beautiful glow that gave him plenty to see by. 'Glowing' was a good look on Mabel.

Once he finished he climbed on the diving board, the one that had been in perpetual use earlier, and made a production of preparing to dive in, examining the water and sticking out a finger after wetting it as if he was testing the direction of the wind. Mabel watched him the whole time and cheered, telling him to do a 'triple double lariat' or a '1080 ollie backtwist.' He cannonballed, which had her booing, so he splashed water in her face and swam away in retreat.

The water was actually pretty warm, now full of the day's heat. They played tag together, tagging each other by yanking the person deeper into the water by the foot instead of the traditional single touch. Probably not the safest ruleset, and it shoved water up their noses uncomfortably every time, but he wasn't gonna stop until she did, and she wasn't gonna stop until he did. They had races and breath-holding competitions, though they could never determine a winner due to their constant attempts at sabotage, through kicks or funny faces or tickling. After determining the final score to be 0-0 since they were both disqualified from every match, an idea struck him and he climbed out of the pool, pulling up his trunks as they sagged from the weight of the water.

He grabbed his special key and used it to open a small building off to the side of the pool, ransacking the collection of pool toys stored inside. He wrapped one arm around a bunch of pool noodles and the other around some tubes and carried them back to the pool, getting Mabel's attention.

"MABEL! You want noodles, or tubes?"

She turned to him and stared for a while, almost blank-faced, and he figured she was really going over her options. Leave it to Mabel to think harder about what kind of pool toy she wanted than about what major she wanted.

He gave her a few seconds more but the cold of the night chilled his moist skin and made him want to get back in the water. "You decide yet?"

That seemed to startle her a bit, as if she was in some kind of trance. "Wha huh?"

He looked at her quizzically, wondering if she had got caught up in some kooky loop in her mind, and there wasn't enough light to be sure but it almost looked like her face turned red.

He repeated his question, "You want NOODLZ, er TOOBZ," donning a silly voice to get her to laugh.

She giggled, and he gave himself an internal high five. "Um how about... BOTH!" She stuck her hands out in a 'gimme gimme' gesture, and he tossed his entire haul onto her head. She squealed and grabbed as much as she could, trying to make the world's most unstable raft. His shorts had started to sag again so he pulled them back up and jumped back into the water, landing on a few of the pool toys Mabel hadn't utilized yet.

They messed around with the toys a bit before Mabel got greedier. They pillaged the pool closet a few more times and eventually almost every single thing stored in there had ended up in the water. Most of it was used once then tossed aside, leaving the majority of the pool a graveyard of plastic and foam, and it made the actual act of swimming rather difficult. Neither of them really cared.

### **Step 5: Let things calm down.**

After dozens of squirt-gun exchanges, pool noodle jousts, and raft surfing challenges that carried them past midnight, they eventually wore themselves out. Dipper had taken to floating face up on the water unmoving, letting himself drift around at the water's whim as he listened to Mabel's distant splashes, his head occasionally bumping into all their debris. He closed his eyes and let the water fill his ears, muting his hearing and bouncing ocean sounds around his skull. He knew their time at the pool was coming to an end, and he knew if he wanted something to happen, he'd have to make a move soon, so he tried to build up his confidence while he had the time.

He didn't get very far, but it'd have to do, because after a minute or two of floating he heard Mabel's splashing get nearer, until he felt sprays of droplets against his skin.

“Guess you’re all tuckered out, huh Dip?”

He opened his eyes and turned to her, noting the cheer in her eyes and the hint of tiredness behind it. Looked like she was running low on fuel too, though she’d never admit it.

“Dunno what you’re talking about, I’m still good to go.” He gave a half-hearted paddle in the water.

“Careful there, wouldn’t want ya torpedoing into the walls of the pool.”

“You’re right. How ‘bout we just, y’know, float around a bit?”

“Can I pretend to be a boat?”

“Sure.”

She made the closest approximation to a boat horn she was capable of—“Awooga”—before flipping herself to float on the top of the pool alongside him.

The two of them drifted together while staring at the sky, Mabel making increasingly quieter boat noises. The waves they had caused with their earlier play had died down, and the remaining currents were mercifully keeping them together, always within arm’s reach. A soothing feeling of seclusion seemed to radiate throughout the water, and it reflected off the two of them, between the two of them, absorbed by the two of them. The rest of the world bled away, like it had been a painting the whole time and all their splashing made the colors run, and the only things left were him and her, floating gently in a puddle of blue.

He turned to look at her again and he wondered if she would see nothing but suds if she turned to look at him. His eyes must have adjusted too much to the dark, because the mild glow of the moon lit her up now, brilliant and dazzling, and the light stuck in his vision like he had stared at the sun. Her long hair was splayed out in the water like the clouds of a galaxy, given faint streaks of color by reflections off the pool toys. She was kicking her feet in the water, slow enough so that she wouldn’t be propelled, slow enough that he could see her toes clench and unclench, and the movement shifted the rest of her, shifted the bits and bobs on her swimsuit, and made them sparkle so much he swore he could see constellations. Dipper sometimes thought about how big the universe was, but right then, he was struck by how small it could be.

Her head turned and their eyes met. Small droplets of water cascaded down her face back into the pool and something inside him jolted. His chronic worries flared and started battle with his (not so) alien friend, pulling his mind in two different directions. His uncertainty over her feelings, his desperate need to not threaten their current relationship, even the baseline anxiety that came with making a move, all of it almost yanked his head back toward the sky, but her calm smile brightened up in the slightest way and his gaze all but chained itself to her.

He let his hand float imperceptibly toward hers.



**Step 6: Have a Moment.**

Okay, he's not quite sure what happened next.

He'd never really believed it when people said they were hypnotized, but SOMETHING made him lose a few seconds. One minute he was floating there next to her, captivated, and in the next he was tilting his head up at her as she stood on the lip of the pool, only a foot away, staring down at him with a mischievous look on her face. Her grin turned downright evil, and that made him more terrified than any fear his mind could conjure.

"Mabel..." he shakily eked out, eyes stretching wide almost painfully.

She took in a deep, deep breath, and yelled out at the top of her lungs.

"BELLY FLOP!"

"M-MABEL!"

He tried to shift himself upright but the fog he had been in turned his limbs to sludge, so he could only watch in horror as she tilted herself off the edge directly on top of him, slamming perpendicularly into his stomach with hers.

She knocked the breath out of him, and probably out of herself, and the two of them plunged deeper into the water, a trail of bubbles spewing out of their mouths as they sunk. He fought against his instinct to suck in a breath and tried to get his bearings, but Mabel's tackle had disoriented him pretty badly. He thrashed his arms around to see if they breached the surface, but all he felt was water.

*Welp, I always knew if I was going to die prematurely it'd be Mabel's fault.*

It was a joke (mostly), but the thought kicked off a reaction in him. He saw Mabel's hair coiling around him, and felt the decorations of her suit poking into his stomach, and realized she hadn't gone back up yet. She was probably just as discombobulated as he was. He wrapped his arm around her and twisted, shifting her parallel next to him, and it seemed to force her out of her own daze. He threw her a quick glare, though her cheeks were still squished by a smile, and as his lungs started to burn he forced himself to focus on figuring out which direction was up.

Turns out it wasn't hard, since it was toward a field of bright plastic, but apparently Mabel can literally knock the sense right out of him. He oriented them toward it and paddled his legs, pulling her with him, and together they resurfaced, breathing in hard gulps of air and sending a collection of squirt-guns drifting away.

He spent some time collecting himself, inhaling and exhaling slowly, but a few giggles hit his ear along with the puffs of breath that started them. A streak of irritation hit, one that burned a little hotter than the kind Mabel usually engendered.

"Mabel! What the heck? Why did you do that?!"

"Aw come on, I was just goofin' around." She gave him a nonchalant wave of her hand.

"I'm serious Mabel! This isn't just silly ol' Dipper worrying about the little things again, do you know how dangerous that was?!"

"P'shhh, you're exaggerating! We're fine, we're both in one piece. Some of us more than others!" She wiggled a bit and pointed to her swimsuit, proud of her pun.

He ignored it, knowing that if he argued he'd get caught in a loop of her deflections. Mabel's natural state was silliness, but unfortunately that made her pretty capable of avoiding seriousness if she wanted to. So instead he just kept a stern glare focused on her, unwilling to give her a pass. It took a little time but eventually the gravity of the situation took, and the joy on her face slowly melted away. She opened her mouth a few times to retort but never got out the words, and after a few attempts she looked away bashfully.

"...Sorry, Dipper."

She said it quietly enough that he could barely hear it over the slapping of the water against the walls of the pool. It was almost unfair; the shameful look she adopted was so jarring on a face so tuned for happiness that HE started to feel guilty for making her sad. He was about to chastise himself for making her cry before he realized her eyes were wet because they were in a friggin' swimming pool. The whole situation was making him feel frustrated, in more ways than one.

He gave a big sigh. "...Look, it's fine. I'm just upset because I was trying to..." He cut himself off before saying anything more. This was definitely not any kind of moment he wanted.

"...Trying to what?"

*Yeah, trying to what, Dipper?* Her tone betrayed a genuine curiosity, but he certainly wasn't going to sate it.

"...Nothing. I dunno." He shook his head clear. "T-The point is, you shouldn't go around jumping on people in the water. You could've gotten hurt!"

She gave him a weird look, like she wanted to correct him on something, but seemed to let it go. Instead, a tender smile wormed its way onto her face and she let out a contented chuckle.

"I think I'd've been okay," she said confidently, stating a fact and not picking an argument.

"And why's that exactly?"

"'Cuz I've got you here to make sure." She gave him a little poke on the forehead.

More unfairness. Just as easily as she made him cold with guilt, she blew that guilt away and warmed his heart. His own face fought against him, battling to put on a smile while he tried to keep it solemn, but the way Mabel brightened up told him who the victor

was. It was ridiculous how fast she was able to shift his moods. He gave her a suffering roll of his eyes, signaling forgiveness paired with mild annoyance, and decided he liked the warmth much better anyhow.

And Mabel sure was warm. His concern had narrowed his focus, but now he realized that his arm was still wrapped around her waist in a side-hug, and her own arms had circled him, her fingers tickling the skin on his neck and shoulders, hanging on from when he pulled her up. Their legs rubbed together in the water and their cheeks nearly touched, and he squeezed her a little closer, enjoying the contact for a bit. Not in the tingly, bubbly way that had come to characterize his feelings toward her recently - the mood from earlier was all but destroyed - but in the way he always had, basking in her presence, comforted by the knowledge that she was safe and whole.

He figured this was the one time he could pull it off, so he gave her a quick smooch on her forehead, causing her to giggle sweetly, before he let her go and pulled himself up out of the pool.

“Well, pretty sure it’s about time we head out.”

“Whaat! But I’m not done swimming yet. I promise I’ll only jump on you a little from now on!”

“C’mon Mabel, it’s pretty late as it is. Plus, it’s probobably gonna take a while to put away all this stuff.”

He swept his hand toward the pool, and Mabel turned around. A good half of its surface was occupied by glossy-plastic flotsam, and after staring for a bit Mabel sucked in a breath.

“Whoops.”

“Yup. Whoops.”

They silently compromised and Mabel stayed in the water, herding the toys toward the edges for Dipper to scoop up and throw back in the pool closet. She tried to start another go by grabbing a squirt-gun and spritzing his butt, but when he was about to fire back she was hit with a big yawn, and they worked harder to finish so that she could fall asleep in a bed instead of a pool.

They got everything packed away, tied the cover back over the pool, and made sure to close the lock on the gate as they left. He was pretty sure they wouldn’t get caught or anything, but it couldn’t hurt to mind the details. Plus, it kept out whatever awful riffraff would dare break into a pool at night for their own sick, selfish gain. He shook his head at the world.

## Operation Swimming Pool: Failed

They drove back to their dorms in a companionable silence and got themselves into their respective beds, and he thought about what went wrong. Just like last time, most of the plan had worked out fairly well, and he established what he thought was a pretty romantic atmosphere. But he couldn't stick the landing. Or, Mabel wouldn't LET him stick the landing. He wasn't oblivious; he saw that both times Mabel shoved them into a turn, he just couldn't tell if it was on purpose or not. Wrecking the mood was a Mabel specialty, but usually the moods she wrecked were the dark, dismal ones.

It churned his gut, thinking she might be aware of his machinations and was putting a stop to it. If she was just unaware and nothing came of it, he could go back to keeping his feelings away from her, but if she knew what was going on...

The only thing that kept him going were the six words he'd read at the start of her note. They still existed (unless she deleted the file), they were definitely real, his eyes saw the pixels and the pixels spelled out a confession. Maybe she just had her own concerns about him.

He felt it couldn't hurt to give it a few more shots. Starting a... *relationship*... with his *sister*... was always going to be tough. He was willing to work for it. Besides, if it was meant to happen, it would happen.

Right?

Pop, pop.

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## Operation Mentor

**Summary:** One of them will ask the other to teach them something, and during the teaching process the instructor in question will assist the learner by taking their hands and demonstrating proper technique, and the contact combined with the sharing of an important passion will lead to a 'Moment,' finally.

### Step 1: Figure out a skill to be taught.

Dipper hadn't always had the most confidence in himself and the things he'd defined himself by, and while he'd gotten better about it, code-breaking, physics problems, and biological anomalies weren't skills you taught by sidling up behind someone and grabbing their hands. Even if they were, if Mabel had asked to know more about those things he'd likely start a full on lesson plan and forget the romance entirely.

So he had to learn from Mabel, and luckily most of Mabel's proficiencies were craft related. He figured pottery was too on the nose, and she probably didn't have a clay wheel in her dorm room anyway, but he had an in with his earlier agreement. Since he had promised

to ‘help’ her with her clothing design, there was plenty opportunity to ask to learn some beginner knitting techniques. Frankly, it was a bit embarrassing that he was completely clueless about the practice when he had a sister who’d been making her own clothing since she was 8.

So, all he had to do was ask her how to knit, and then learn. Sounded simple enough.

### **Step 2: Ask to learn that skill.**

A few days after their outing at the pool he found himself back in her dorm room, wearing some kind of long multilayered gown that Mabel insisted wasn’t a dress, but she made him take his pants off anyway. He made a crack about what kind boxers go well with dresses but didn’t expect her to answer, so he completely missed it when she did. Now he’d never know.

She worked less intensely than the week before, no longer bound by impending due dates, so it was an easier affair. She spent less time articulating the intents of the design and more time chatting, about her friends or his classmates or the movies they had watched together the day after the pool. He was worried he was distracting her from her work but if anything she was far more deliberate.

She spent more time with the cloth ruler against his form, measuring and remeasuring often and precisely, “just really makin’ sure,” she said. She kept shifting him into pose after pose, grabbing his arms or his shoulders or even his legs and maneuvering him into position. She would set him up and back off every time, giving him a meticulous look over, and after he questioned why she wasn’t taking reference pictures she got a little red from embarrassment and said she had forgotten.

She lost some steam after that and decided to put away that particular project, but replaced it with a basket full of bundles of thread and yarn, knitting on a half-finished sweater. It was an old sight, one that meant she was settling in for the day, since the steady clacking of the knitting needles relaxed her the same way rereading an old book relaxed him. Usually when he saw that he’d park himself next to her and they’d relax together, sometimes silently, sometimes not, but right then it gave him an opportunity. He went over and sat down beside her on the sofa. After he put his pants back on.

“What’re you working on now?”

She stopped her needling and held the dark-green sweater up to him. She never seemed to have a consistent way of constructing them, but this one only had the top half of the torso and one of the sleeves done. The words “FREE HUGS\*” were written on the chest of the garment, and “HUG HERE” was inlaid repeatedly up the sleeve, all in lighter colored yarn.

“What’s the asterisk for?”

She flipped the sweater over and the back of it said “\*\$10 maintenance fee for every hug” in a much smaller font.

“Nice.”

“I’m trying to see if I can make it legally binding!”

He gave her a humored chuckle, before something occurred to him. “Wait, does that include everyone? Am I gonna have to pay for my own sister’s hugs?”

She gave her sweater a once over, examining it closely. “Hm, I don’t SEE anything about exceptions. . . Sorry bro, can’t help you. You want some of my product you gotta pay like everyone else.”

“Wow. Well I definitely can’t afford that. Guess we can’t hug anymore.” He shrugged and sighed dramatically. He pulled out his wallet and flipped it upside-down, but nothing fell out and he sighed even harder.

“... Maaaybe I can write somethin’ in there somewhere,” she conceded, and the two of them snorted a few laughs.

“So. . .,” he said. Great start. “You know the whole. . . knitting and sewing thing you do?”

She looked at him like his tongue had scuttled out of his mouth, and based on his remarkable display of eloquence for all he knew it had.

“Um. . . yeah? Kinda doing it right now?” She tapped the top of her needles together.

“Right, yeah, that’s what I’m talking about. I was just wondering. . .,” he rotated his hands around themselves, “is it, you know. . . fun?”

Guess his tongue started crawling around his head because even though the look on her face changed it was no less bewildered.

“Boy, I sure hope so! Would’ve hated to have spent 10 straight years of my life doing something boring.”

“It probably wasn’t 10 STRAIGHT years. You did other stuff besides that.”

“I’m counting the times I knitted in my sleep. That’s when I do some of my best work!”

“Oh. Yeah 10 years sounds about right.”

“What’s up with the questionnaire, brosef? You sound like the weirdest internet survey.”

“Well, you know, it’s just.” *Man, I really should’ve written this out and practiced beforehand.* “I guess with all the modelling I’ve been doing the past week, I’ve been kinda. . . curious. About knitting and stuff. So I was wondering if maybe. . . you could teach me?”

He pressed his tongue against the backs of his teeth to confirm it was still there, because her eyebrows stayed twisted in confusion, one corner of her mouth upturned in disbelief. Did he accidentally ask her in Latin? It wouldn't be the first time it happened.

"Hm... are you teasing me over something? I already said I'd fix my sweater up, no bucks for bro hugs, I promise."

"I'm not teasing. Why would you think I was teasing?"

"Cuz I've been doing this forever and you've never wanted to learn before?"

Okay, that made him feel a little bad, but hey, there was no time like the present.

"Well, things... change. I want to learn now."

"Really?"

"Really."

He grinned at her, hoping the sincerity shone through. It took some time, but eventually the perplexed look on her face vanished, and her almost-frown widened at a perfectly even pace until it reached from ear to ear, showing off all her teeth. He got a lot of sweet smiles out of her but it was unusual for him to inspire one of unbridled joy. Those are usually reserved for small animals and freshly baked pastries.

She squealed, high pitched and loud, and it rang his ears and made him wince. "OMIGOD! OMIGOD YES I'D LOVE TO TEACH YOU DIPPER!"

She tossed her sweater aside, grabbed her basket of supplies, and literally threw it at him, covering him in yarn, ribbons, and thread of all colors. She squished herself next to him and drew out a few needles from the pile of supplies in his lap, forcing them into his hands, telling him to hold them while she started unwinding a few balls of blue yarn.

So far so good.

### **Step 3: Learn.**

It had started off well enough, but he forgot another thing about Mabel: she wasn't really THAT different from him. He KNEW that if the roles were reversed he'd go overboard instructing her on the minute details of whatever she had asked him to explain, and it turned out that she had the same impulse. Within seconds she had described to him a dozen different types of stitches, mentioned casting on and binding off (she talked too fast for him to catch what those meant), delineated how she used sewing techniques on certain knit designs.

Mabel was clearly very knowledgeable, but unfortunately she wasn't that great of a teacher, at least not for him. Her exuberance never slowed, and he was so completely lost after a few minutes. He kept asking her to repeat things, and she did, but rarely lingered

long enough for him to catch on properly. This is where their differences hit, and hard: he learned through methodical repetition and careful note-taking, but clearly that wasn't something Mabel allowed for.

But as he was thinking that this whole situation might have been doomed from the start, his mind echoed the smile she had given him right before she leapt into teacher action and the happiness in her scream. This clearly meant a lot to her.

*Welp. Guess I just gotta to do better.*

One skill they do share is the ability to force themselves to adapt to the other, when they need to. They've had to use it often, and he made himself use it now. It wasn't perfect, and it wasn't easy, but he knew he could do it.

He asked her to slow down, more firmly than he had liked, but he REALLY needed calmer direction. He ended up telling her he just couldn't keep up and he felt a little dumb admitting it, but it seemed to spark some level of comprehension in her. They had a bit of an awkward stumble trying to sync with each other, her taking time to explain things over and over, a bit agitated at the repetition but still happy to do it if it meant Dipper followed along better. He tried to ask way fewer questions than he normally would when being taught something, tried to work a bit more kinetically like Mabel always did.

It was definitely hard. He felt his understanding fall behind more than a few times, a feeling that had always made him raw and uncomfortable. But this whole thing was his idea, and she wanted him to learn so badly, and HE wanted to learn so badly for her, so he pushed himself along. Mabel had him try to make a scarf since the pattern was simple and easy, and he ended up starting and ruining half a dozen. How did he mess up a SCARF, it was just a long rectangle.

She kept grabbing his hands to adjust the way he held the needles in his fingers or show him the way he was supposed to move them to cast on the stitches correctly. He concentrated as hard as he could on her instruction, really trying to take in the details, because after a few hours of failure it became less about the learning and more about impressing. He wanted to show her he could do this, he wanted to show her she could teach him.

By the end of the night he hadn't managed a scarf, but he did end up binding off a little, misshapen blue square that he guessed could be a coaster. With calloused fingers he held it up to her sheepishly, embarrassed at the attempt, and she threw herself into him and wrapped him in a hug, screaming "You did it! You did it! You made a thing! With your very own hands! I'm so proud!!" He tried to downplay it—it was certainly no custom-made sweater with working Christmas lights embedded—but she wouldn't have any of it. She just bonked him in the head and told him he did great, and, for just a little bit, he let his chest swell with pride.

By the time he had finished it had gotten pretty late, so he figured he should head back to his room. They couldn't set up a definite schedule, but he promised he would come over for lessons at least once a week. He probably couldn't handle more than that, honestly, and he said as much, and she reluctantly agreed. He made sure to grab his coaster, shrugging



in an “I GUESS I’ll take it” sort of way, and that just made her bonk his head again. She gave him one last happy hug, and as he went for the door he heard her start packing up her supplies. He glanced at his creation a few times as he walked back to his room, and by the time he closed his bedroom door, a genuine smile had lit his face.

He sat the coaster on his desk, prominent and notable, and though it was such a little thing, if she was proud of it for him, there was no reason he couldn’t be too.

He threw on his pajamas and tossed himself into bed.

#### **Step 4: ...Have a Moment?**

Wait, crud! *CRUD!*

He forgot! HE FORGOT! HE FORGOT TO GO FOR IT!

DANG IT!!

#### **Operation Mentor: Failed**

He slapped his palms against his forehead—maybe if he did it hard enough it’d send him back in time. He had gotten so caught up in figuring out how to knit that the reason for his trying had completely left his mind. *Stupid, stupid*. Slap, slap. She even grabbed his hands! A whole bunch of times! He was pretty sure he didn’t even GLANCE at her eyes when that happened, how are they supposed to stare longingly at each other if he wasn’t looking at her eyes?!

Alright, well, this one was on him. He forgot how overboard Mabel could go, and he forgot the same was true for him. She went in whole hog teaching him and he got caught up in her zeal, like he always did. Acknowledging that didn’t make him less annoyed, but since it wasn’t an explicit rejection or an accidental sabotage, he wasn’t quite dissuaded.

And besides, he couldn’t say the outcome was bad. He didn’t go into this expecting to be dispassionate about or uninterested in knitting; Mabel cared about it and so he cared about it too. But he absolutely ended up caring far more than he thought he would, and now, he has another thing to share with her. There’s no downside to that.

*I cannot believe I FORGOT I was trying to kiss my sister.*

Well. Maybe next time?

## Operation Sick Day

**Summary:** One of them will be afflicted with illness, and ask the other to play nursemaid. The physical aspect of caregiving combined with the implicit intimacy of the action will set off their emotions and they'll like, make out or something, please.

### Step 1: Get sick.

So, this one was gonna be tough.

Mabel had a naturally hardy constitution, so the responsibility to get sick fell on him. He thought about faking, but they had done it often enough to their parents that he was pretty sure she'd be able to see through it. No, his sickness needed to be genuine.

He wasn't proud of the series of actions he took next, but they were necessary. A cold seemed like the best option, so while he was in class, or walking around the campus, or even at work, if he heard someone sneeze a bit too loudly, if he heard wheezes and coughs, he'd saunter up as close as he could without coming off as a creep (to them; to himself, it was already too late) and breathe a little deeper than he normally would. He was pretty sure he got a few looks, but hey, it wasn't illegal to breathe too hard, just unsettling.

He went on for 4 days before the frustration started to kick back in. Since the day he saw that note, there had been this omnipresent sense of foreboding he couldn't shake, a knot in his mind that told him if he took too long, he'd lose the opportunity forever. Every day he wasn't sick it thrummed a little more, and eventually it made him desperate.

He gave up on getting a cold, but rhinovirus wasn't the only way to get sick. Sometimes, you needed a different approach.

He went to the store, bought a bunch of raw shrimp, and gobbled them all down.

That oughta do it.

### Step 2: Ask Mabel for help.

*This is hell.*

He had decided to eat them before he went to sleep, figuring he'd wake up the next day green and fevered, but he didn't make it that far. He woke up during the night with something stabbing at his gut, and cut it so close on the way to the bathroom he got some distressingly pink vomit on the side of the toilet bowl. He crouched over the toilet for what had to be hours, retching out shrimp and bile, and when his stomach ran out it expunged the air he had swallowed.

At some point his roommate came knocking and Dipper remembered he had a roommate, something he forgot to account for in his plan. His plans were getting sloppier. His stomach had, if not quite settled, given him a wondrous reprieve where it wasn't trying to

turn itself inside out, so he cleaned up the puke and flushed his mess down a few times before going back to his room and muttering out a raspy “Sick” to his completely unconcerned roomie.

Pain still squeezed his gut but not enough to hold him back from sleep, the sheer exhaustion from vomiting laying over him like the world’s most atrocious blanket, and he drifted in and out of restless slumber, dreaming about vicious sea creatures eating him whole.

Sometime during the afternoon, he figured, based on the way the light poked through his window, he felt a warm, silky hand on his forehead, though the sweat on his skin turned it clammy. He forced his eyes open and saw a face hovering over him twisted with concern. Mabel’s brow was furrowed and her teeth bit at her lip, and while on a better day he’d say the light behind her framed her with a halo, it really just hurt his eyes.

“Geez, bro, what happened to you?”

He moaned out the word “shrimp” in four syllables and two breaths, and right before he closed his eyes again he saw her nod in understanding.

“Aw, poor Dippinsauce, went a few rounds against seafood and lost, huh? Let’s hope we don’t see that food again!” She waited a beat for a chuckle, or even a groan, but neither came. “I can’t stay too long but I’m a stick around for a while and keep an eye on you, okay?”

He dug his head into his pillow in a way that might have also been a nod, and that was all she was getting out of him.

He was pretty sure he didn’t manage to get to his phone either on the way to the bathroom or on the way back, so her presence here was all her doing. During his less uneasy periods of wakefulness he tried to silently transmit his gratitude but it was hard when the poison in his belly kept trying to overtake him. Mabel received it regardless if the sympathetic pats on his head were anything to go by, and for the next few hours she sat on his bed with him, occasionally asking if he needed anything, and filling the silence he responded with by typing away on her laptop.

### **Step 3: Have a Moment.**

Yeah, no. He had no idea why he thought being sick would put him on the fast track to romance-ville. It was nice that Mabel was taking care of him but the interaction was pretty one-sided, and even if it wasn’t he felt more disgusting than alluring. Even if he could open his eyes to stare longingly into hers, he doubted the crust in the corners of them, the sweat on his face, or the vomit on his breath really got her engines going.

The closest things came was when, an hour or so after she warmed up a can of soup for him and commanded him to eat and half an hour after he finished, she had taken to stroking the curls of the hair against his temple, whispering something he couldn’t quite hear, and in another, far-off world he would have leapt up and kissed her then and there. Too bad the

chunks of chicken alleged themselves with the shrimp, and fought out of his stomach just as hard. Mabel had sensed it almost psychically, lurching for the trash can and giving it to him just in time, and for a moment it made him love her the most he'd ever loved her, but that was the only moment he was getting.

### **Operation Sick Day: Failed**

She stayed for an hour or two after that, but had to take off for reasons he couldn't parse since so much of his concentration was going toward keeping his insides on the inside. He was cogent enough to promise himself he'd apologize to and thank Mabel profusely when he felt better, but not enough to theorize when exactly that would be. So he surrendered to the haze of sickness, and hoped the next plan would go a bit better.

Because he was running out of plans.

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### **Operation Masseuse**

**Summary:** After an exhausting day on her part, he will offer to massage her back or rub her feet and at some point the process will take a passionate turn and they'll kiss and be happy forever.

#### **Step 1:**

### **Operation Masseuse: Failed**

The less said about this one, the better—it was an unmitigated disaster. He did learn two lessons for the future, though: he should probably know how to do foot rubs before trying them, and getting kicked in the face can cause an awful lot of bleeding.

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### **Operation Life Threatening Situation**

**Summary:** After facing death-defying odds and surviving, they'll realize that life is short, shuck taboos, and reveal their feelings for each other, feelings that Mabel definitely has and that Dipper isn't imagining, PLEASE.

### **Operation Life Threatening Situation: Aborted**

He was pretty sure they've dealt with this enough in their lives. He shouldn't have even considered it. He was terrible for even writing it down.

He whispered an apology into the air.

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## Operation Strip Poker

~~Summary:~~ He'll ask her if she wants to play poker then subtly suggest

No

Operation Aborted

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## Operation Dream Invasion

~~Summary:~~

NO.

Operation Aborted

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## ~~Operation Fake Love Potion~~

NO!!

Operation Aborted

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## Operation Just Flippin' Confess

... *Ugh.*

### Operation Aborted

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Weeks after the day he first saw Mabel's note, Dipper found himself flipping through a notebook with one hand, his head resting in the other. It was a very special notebook, one he'd been hiding in his bottom drawer, underneath his socks and underwear, behind a false panel, with a string he tied across it so he would know if anyone disturbed it. It would've been very bad if anyone saw all the things he had written in its pages.

It was where he had outlined all the plans he had: all the ones he tried, all the one's he'd never try, all the ones he wished he had the courage to try. It had the notes he had taken after failed attempts, line after crooked line squished together detailing all the mistakes he made or the lessons he learned or the things he should've done differently. It was full to bursting, with loose, extra pages tucked in with addendums and a sticker or two to tag important sections, and all of it was worthless.

He had been so sure. So sure that there was something between them, sure that if the situation was just right, things would fall into place. But it was hard to ignore that something got in the way every time, and it was even harder to ignore what those things were. Because half the time, it was him, being dumb, being Dipper, and if he couldn't manage to give her one Moment she deserved, how could he possibly expect to give her all the others? And the other half was Mabel, not understanding, not caring, or not wanting, and if she was as uninterested as she seemed then it didn't matter what words she wrote. Maybe she didn't mean them, or maybe she did but had a million and one good reasons not to pursue; either way, he needed to stop.

He closed the notebook and almost tossed it into his trash bin, but he didn't want to risk someone finding it in the dump later or something, so he hid it away back in its spot and resolved to burn it later. He lived on a college campus, there was bound to be a bonfire within the week.

He just felt so *exhausted*, so defeated. He could have gone his whole life ignoring those feelings, letting them fade, letting them die, but the brief glimmer of hope he'd given himself had made them so much heavier. What had felt light and bubbly before now ached his shoulders and cricked his spine, just as smothering but far more agonizing. He'd get over it, eventually; he'd make himself, for her. But eventually was an eternity away, or just as far off, and until then he'd just have to hope he wasn't crushed under the weight.

He went to his bathroom and splashed water on his face, hoping if he scrubbed it hard enough he'd wash away his troubles. Nope. Still there. He glanced up at the mirror in front of him and the man looking back wore most lovelorn expression he'd ever seen, and it almost made him cry. *God, look at that chump. I'd sure hate to be that guy.*

He stared for far too long, fighting not to surrender to self-pity, and could only manage a draw. He splashed his face one last time and forced his gaze down to the sink, and was struck with an overpowering empathy for the water slurping down the drain.

Bloop.

---

He kept away from her for a while, citing lots of homework as his excuse, even cancelling that week's knitting lesson, and he'd never felt so low as he did when he heard the disappointment in her voice. But he needed distance, just a little, to let the worst of the pressure dissipate. He knew he couldn't handle more than a few days apart anyway, not that she'd give him more come Twin Time day.

By the time the next one arrived he had spent a good 5 days moping and sulking. He still felt like gravity was working twice as hard around him but any more time without Mabel would double it again. The deluge of selfies she had sent him day of featuring her with an exaggerated sad face holding up her computer along with the text "Wish u were here" told him she was feeling the separation too. So when mid-afternoon hit, he pulled himself together, texted her back saying he'd be there soon, and only tarried for 15 minutes before he left.

When he opened her already unlocked door, the sunlight behind him peaked in, giving the room its only light aside from the glow of an LCD screen. She had already turned off all the others and drawn curtains over the windows, and Mabel didn't skimp on curtains. They were thick enough to trick the world into being night. Usually she sets that up while he was making Mabelcorn, so she was probably eager to get into movie time.

He closed the door, flooding the room back into mostly-darkness. The air smelled bitter-sour from the popcorn and the wrong kind of sweet, like nearly-rotten candy left out in the rain, and it surprised him that she had already prepared the Mabelcorn too. She was sitting on the couch, wrapped tightly in a blanket and looking at her computer screen, and it illuminated her face as she turned to look at him, an excited smile teasing at her lips.

"Well hey there mysterious stranger, nice to meet you! You wouldn't happen to know where mah brobro is, would ya? I'm waitin' for him and it's been SO LONG since I've seen him. Startin' to forget what his dorky face looks like..." She pouted her lip, and it was just a bit she was doing but he could see the real emotion behind it too.

"It's only been a week, Mabel."

She gasped. "How do you know my name?! Are you stalking me? You better get outta here before my brother shows up, or else!"

Dipper shrugged. “Eh, I think I could take him.”

“Duh, he’s not for taking YOU on, he’s for cheering ME on as I kick your butt!”

He chuckled. That WAS probably what would happen if a stranger broke in. “How about instead of my butt getting kicked, I park it next to you and we watch some movies? Y’know, until your brother shows up.” It almost turned his face red this little skit they were doing, pretending not to be related.

“Hm... I GUESS we could. Only ‘cuz I really wanna get my movie on. Your keister’s out once he gets back though.” She held out the bowl she had in her lap. “Want some Dippercorn?”

He rolled his eyes, took off his hat and shoes, and sat down next to her, and she threw the blanket she had cloaked herself in around him too. He adjusted himself and snuggled up as she placed the laptop on the table in front of them and started up a movie playlist, and they started watching together.

For hours they ate, and riffed, and laughed, at all the weird artsy B-movies Mabel had chosen for the night. He was glad she hadn’t chosen romance or rom-coms; he didn’t think he could handle it. Something in him was still wounded, still raw. But the hurt wasn’t enough to deprive him of enjoyment. It never would be, not really. Whatever his feelings were, whatever hers were, the most important thing was that they were together, and he wasn’t going to demand the terms by which they were. It was enough she was in his life, as his sister, as his best friend. He believed that with all his heart.

So he sat and enjoyed her warmth, like he did even before things changed in him, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and scooting her close, letting her head lean into his shoulder. He smelled vanilla in her hair, and let himself have that, but pushed the rest of it away. It was still the happiest he’d been all week.

He didn’t really ‘get’ any of the movies they watched, and she didn’t either, but after a half-hour long argument about what kind of pets trees would have if they were alive like humans were he figured they weren’t really trying in the first place. After the movie that spawned the argument ended, the fullscreen window closed out, back to the browser. Apparently, the playlist was over.

“That’s all you put on, Mabel? We’ve still got a good few hours left,” he said, noting the time.

“Well, I WAS gonna ask my brother to pick some too, but the doofus never showed up! I guess the night’s over.”

“Oh. We’re still doing this, huh?”

“Doing what, mysterious stalking stranger?” She had shifted so that she was looking at his eyes, head still on his shoulder.

“Okay, what do I have to do to bring back ‘your brother.’”



“Seems like that’s kinda on him! He’s just makin’ me sit here and wait, when he could have shown up whenever he wanted! I thought he cared about me.” She dropped her lip into the same exaggerated pout.

“Well, I have it on good authority that he loves you more than anything, so I’m sure he’ll show up.”

It was a little corny, and a little embarrassing, and exactly the right thing to say, because it almost made her break character, her face straining to hold back a smile and a laugh. Not an easy feat.

“You seem to know an awful lot about the two of us, mysterious stranger, so tell me, if he loves me so much, why isn’t he here?”

“C’mon, Mabe’s, he’s always here.”

“Is he?”

She picked her head off his shoulder and looked him straight on, an unusual sparkle of... something, in her eyes and on her lips, one he can’t quite decode.

“He is. I am.” He squeezed her shoulder with his hand.

“Are you?”

The way she said it made his eyebrows wrinkle briefly in confusion. There was something hidden there, something behind the words, and for the life of him he couldn’t figure out what. Her mouth stayed in an easy grin, a much softer smile than the ones usually housed on her face, and he tried to solve the puzzle, decrypt the look she was giving him, but the answer kept sliding away like oil through his fingers, and he was about to shake his head and start up another movie—

And that was when he saw it.

It was in her eyes. A tiny little wrinkle by the corners, a flutter in the iris, a slight shift in her eyelids—there was something there. He couldn’t tell what it was at first but he knew it felt familiar. An overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* clawed at him, tightened his forehead, made him grind his teeth. He had never seen that look in her, never ever, but... he HAD seen it before, in someone else.

The memory hit him so hard it almost threw his head back. He remembered why it was familiar, where he had seen two brown eyes just like hers wrinkle and flutter and shift in exactly the same way.

It was the same look he saw in the mirror almost a week ago, needy and lovesick. It pained him to see it in himself, but seeing it in her, all he could think was how beautiful it was, how beautiful she looked with it adorned on her face. In all his planning, in all his notes, he had never quite known what the moment he was looking for would feel like, but

now it couldn't be more obvious. It had to feel like this. All the emotions he had pushed away earlier came roaring back, hungry and powerful, and as he felt his eyes mirror hers he let out a shaky breath.

"...M-Mabel?"

It came out throaty and sore, whispered so quietly he almost thought he mimed it. But she must have heard him say it, must have seen his eyes, must have KNOWN they were just like hers, because her eyebrows shot up and her smile widened gorgeously like she had won the lottery. The sight made his lungs burst, made his stomach rupture, made his head explode and pop, and when he started leaning forward, she met him in the middle.

Their lips touched, and he bubbled over.

The gravity that pressed down on him earlier suddenly upended, and he braced himself to hit the ceiling but seemed to go right through it. He wondered where the sofa went, because he couldn't feel it under him, and worried when he lost sensation in both his arms and legs. He had suddenly turned intangible, to everything but the soft pair of lips pressed sweetly against his own. Their delicious heat more than made up for losing most of his physical form.

Electricity crackled between them, against the two pink strips of flesh he still had left, and it sparked through his aeriform body and lit him up like neon. He was glad his eyes were closed and hoped that hers were too; he could've easily blinded them. He felt so bright, so blazing, burning red all over like the gas he had become. He hummed into her mouth, and she buzzed back in turn, and he thought she might be neon too.

They stayed connected for centuries, probably; time had no meaning to flickers of light. But eventually he broke away with a soft smack, needing to see her face again to verify that everything really happened. And as he opened his eyes, as his body returned, he saw Mabel's head follow his with still puckered lips, desperate for continued contact. The motion choked what little breath he had out of him, and as her eyelids slowly fluttered open, her eyes adoring and awestruck, he fell for her all over again.

"Wow..."

They said it simultaneously, their twinness striking again, and they couldn't help but laugh out a breath. They stayed locked on to each other, radiating and reflecting and absorbing devotion and wonder, and the atmosphere cooled down enough that he began to speak.

"Mabel, I—"

Apparently that had been the calm before the storm, because before he got out another word she leapt forward and reignited the kiss, with a vastly different energy. A dam had broken inside her; where the first kiss was gentle and loving, the second was all passion and longing. Her palms were on his cheeks, fingers gripping his neck, and she manipulated his head this way and that to CONSUME him better. She pressed open mouthed kisses against

his mouth over and over, panting hard between each one, kissing his top lip, his bottom lip, the corners of his mouth. He surrendered to her ministrations, reciprocating as best he could but letting her do most of the work because WOW she seemed so much better at this than he was.

He wanted to do SOMETHING though, something suave, but when he moved his arms to wrap them around her waist and pull her into his lap, she reminded him how useless it was to try to control Hurricane Mabel. She SHOVED him into laying position on the couch, his head grazing its arm, and clambered on top of him like she had done during the pillow fight, though with a much better follow up. He felt her knees on either side of his waist and long brown hair spilled over his face, and he laughed against her mouth as she tried to flip it back behind her without taking her lips and hands off of him. He did her a favor and collected her locks with his hands and tucked them behind her ears, running his fingers along her temples, caressing her ears, and she let out a satisfied breath in return.

The sound bolstered his confidence so he moved his left arm down to her waist, and when he placed his hand on her back and squeezed her closer she fell into him and *whimpered*. He could feel her body pressed tightly against him, burning so hot he almost tore his hand away. She stopped kissing for a second and her face showed pure desire, eyes crinkled in want, and he had to bite his lip to stop from groaning pathetically.

It made him feel the most confident he'd ever felt, and it kicked off an acceleration on her part. She dove back in for a second time, just as heated, crashing her mouth hard against his, and it didn't take long before he felt her velvety tongue licking at his lips. He started losing sensation again, the feeling in his extremities drifting away as he rolled his eyes back into his head and let her taste him. He caught himself when she tugged at his hair in disappointment, and remembered to keep stroking her back with his hand and pulling her closer, remembered to keep his other hand caressing the side of her head, her hair flowing through his fingers. She rewarded him by jamming her tongue into his mouth and really if she wanted him to pay attention more she had to stop doing things like that.

It was all out of control, in the best way possible. He could barely keep up with her, but like he always did he forced himself to adapt. He gave himself two seconds of intangibility while she licked the side of his tongue, but drew a hard line there. After three more seconds he forced himself to focus, keeping his hands moving in ways that made her hum and moan, sucking at her lips when she stilled them long enough to do so. When she swiped her tongue over his he did the gesture back and her fingers scratched almost painfully at his head. She tasted like old butter, sour candy, and stale chocolate, and it was the most exquisite flavor he'd ever sampled, until he licked her lips and mixed in the berry of her gloss.

They continued, hot and heavy, for so long he could feel their lips start to bruise, and discovering how much they both liked soft lip bites didn't help any. He thought he might've been in a dream at least half a dozen times, and every time Mabel destroyed that thought by moaning out a "Dip" between kisses, breathy and frantic, in a way he never would've let himself imagine.

He took SO MUCH from her, stole her warmth, her breath, her taste, and he would've felt greedy if she hadn't taken from him threefold. His fingers started digging into the yarn of her sweater, and there couldn't have been room left between them but he squished her closer and closer anyway, and when he couldn't hug her tighter he arched his back into her. Anything, ANYTHING, to get a little more.

But something in him ached for a specific kind of contact. Though every kiss she planted on him made another dream come true, he needed something more grounded than dreams. His fingers twitched against her head, pushed themselves away, and his hand latched on to Mabel's wrist, feeling her muscles shift as she moved his head to kiss him more thoroughly. It slowly ran up to the back of her palm and pulled her hand away from his face, and when he interlocked their fingers, the ache faded away.

Things had accelerated so quickly, almost too much for him to bear, but the feel of her fingers between his own helped him endure. He rubbed the pad of his thumb against her hand and felt hers do the same and suddenly catching up seemed within his reach. But when he gave her hand an innocent squeeze she let out another whimper and accelerated things AGAIN, and his ears boomed from hitting Mach one.

She tilted his head up and back, running her lips and tongue from the corner of his mouth down his jaw and to his neck, and when she started sucking at the pulse point just above his collar bone his entire body shivered. He was drowning, slammed back into the water by Mabel yet again, but this time he couldn't summon the energy to find the direction to the surface. This time, he couldn't tell if he wanted to. But when she started whining a faint, muffled word in between wet licks and kisses, a quiet, lusty "brobro" mumbled into his neck, his body was wracked with pleased tingles that he wasn't entirely sure he was comfortable experiencing. It was too much too fast, when the most he'd ever hoped for came and passed eons ago. He was so disoriented and it almost felt like his lungs were burning, so just like before he grabbed a hold of Mabel and pulled them both back up.

He pushed his hands against her shoulders, trying not to be too forceful but with how much his fingers were trembling he probably didn't have to worry. Her eyes were pure affection, her lips were puffy and swollen, and her cheeks were so flush red he had to fight the desire to cool them down with kisses. He was far too anxious to dive back in, but he took in the sight greedily. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and he made sure to commit it to memory.

He did his best to temper his face, to hide the fear and apprehension and only show his elation, but she never had trouble reading him.

"Heh... Guess I kinda got carried away, huh brobro?"

The tingles surged through his body again and he pretended not to feel them.

"Maaaybe a little." It was a raw truth, but he managed to say it good-naturedly.

She gave a shy giggle. "Sorry. Just, I've kiiinda been wantin' to do that for a while now."

“... Really?”

“Yuppers.”

She may have had her tongue down his throat a minute ago, but hearing her say she WANTED it soothed something in him that had been prickling. His face brightened and he started laughing happily, dizzy with the knowledge that she was in this just as deep as he was.

“Wow, that’s... that’s great! I’ve been... me too! For soo long. It’s... Wow.” He was having trouble getting words out, and Mabel was just looking at him teasingly, so he opted to stay quiet for a bit, rubbing at her arms while staring longingly into her eyes. He was gonna make up for all the missed opportunities.

Which actually reminded him...

“Hey, if you wanted to... you know... for a while now, then, how come you never did anything all those times?”

“All what a what?”

“Y’know, when we had that pillow fight, or that time we went to the pool, or when I asked to learn knitting sort of... I planned those out so that we would have, like... romantic opportunities? Where we could, um. Kiss? Man, that sounds pretty bad when I say it out loud.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “A-anyway, you never responded.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, probably going over the details of those days. She caught on to something, because her smile went wide and humored.

“Whaat! You were tryin’ to mack on me all those times? Dip, you rascal, you. And here I thought you just wanted to spend more time with your amazing and wonderful sister.”

That was a kick in the gut. “S-sorry.”

“Aw, I’m just joshin’ you dork. To be honest... I kinda DID feel some stuff.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear nervously. “I just... wasn’t sure if it was the stuff I WANTED it to be, y’know? It’s a big leap from ‘I sure love spendin’ time wif mah brobro whoops I fell on top of him how silly’ to ‘I fell on top of my TWIN BROTHER who wants to KISS me and I WANT TO KISS HIM SO LET’S KISS.’”

“Yeah, well, I’m right there with ya Mabel.”

They stared at each other with goofy grins, letting the ridiculousness of the whole situation pour over them. They were both experts in ridiculous situations and this one took the cake.

“That really is sweet though Dip, you tryin’ to get all romantic on me.” She ran her fingers through his hair.

"Really? Cuz when I said it out loud I creeped myself out." He pushed his head into her hand.

"All romance is creepy until you do it to someone who likes you back!"

"...I'll take your word for it."

"Hey wait a minute! Is that why you got all grumpy with me at the pool? Cuz you couldn't get a taste of these kiss machines?" She pointed at her puckering lips.

"No, I got all 'grumpy' because you almost drowned the two of us."

"Uh HUH..."

"...Aaaand maybe a little bit because I didn't get to kiss you."

"Hah! Knew it."

She lowered her head against his and they brushed their foreheads together lightly.

"So... what got you all a-hankerin' for kisstuations?" she asked.

"...What?"

"Kisstuations! Kiss situations. Why'd you start now? Or, um, 4 weeks ago? That was when I totally kicked your butt at the pillow fight, right? What changed?"

*Uh oh.* He figured that might come up but he was hoping it'd be later. Much later. Like, maybe when they were 60. It would probably be funny then.

"Oh... well... You see, about that... Just, by complete ACCIDENT I... Look, sometimes, things happen, and you can't always control them, and people ACCIDENTALLY see something they aren't supposed to see but they didn't MEAN to, but it's also like, if they already saw it, why not do something about it, even though it was NOT ON PURPOSE—"

"Dipper."

"IsawthenotethatsaidyoulovedmeI'msorry," he confessed in a single breath. He winced in shame, because even though he'd never meant to read it, it still felt like a big invasion of her privacy. Especially since he had acted on what he'd read, made plans because of it, changed the entire way he saw her. Was it really any different than if he had sought it out on purpose if the consequences were the same? Would she put a stop to things because of that? It was a painful thought, but it wasn't like she didn't have the right.

She picked her head up off of his and he worried she was gonna ask him to repeat what he'd said—he knew he probably couldn't get it out again. But she didn't. All she did was raise a single ominous eyebrow, in a manner that suggested that whether he lived or died depended on if it lowered back down or not.

It fell, and she smiled. "Good."

*What?*

“What?”

“Good!”

“You... you’re not mad?”

“Why would I be mad?”

“Uh... because I saw something personal of yours without your permission?”

“Pfft. Oh yeah, silly ol’ Mabel, writin’ her SECRET, TABOO FEELINGS FOR HER BROTHER down, on a COMPUTER, that she SHARES WITH HIM CONSTANTLY.” She pawed at his chest like she was typing on a fictional keyboard. “Sure, Dipper. Did you like the part about your cute butt?”

It took him a second to get what she was saying and the couch fell out from under his apparently cute butt.

“You... the note was fake?”

“It wasn’t fake! Just... maybe not meant to be so secret?”

Oh. *Oooh*.

“You wanted me to see it?!”

She pointed at him with finger guns and gave him a silly wink, clicking her tongue against her teeth.

“What... why?!”

“Duh, remember that thing I said about a big leap? I can’t jump that high, Dipper! So I made a little trampoline out of words. I figured if you saw it and didn’t feel the same way, you’d just ignore it and we’d move on. And if you DID, then you’d just confess, like a NORMAL person, and then we could head on down to smooch-town! Didn’t expect you to get all Rom-Com on me!”

Alright, now he was upset. “And why didn’t YOU just confess like a normal person?!”

“Big leap!”

“So you made me do it instead?!”

“... Yup!”

It looked like he didn’t have to worry about his feelings for Mabel changing too much, because she proved she was just as capable of being a huge pain as she always was, even after they had spent however long kissing. He swallowed all the frustration into his throat and forced it into his vocal chords, letting out a loud, irritated wail aimed at the ceiling, the sky, the entire world. When he looked back at her she held a dopey grin on her face, and he knew she had to pay.

And normally when Mabel annoyed him this much he teased her back, and he could only think of one way to tease her now. He gave her one last ineffectual glare, before he shifted himself up to kiss her again.

He caught her off guard and she let out a surprised giggle, and he pronounced himself the winner of that little exchange. He cupped her face in his hands and pulled her back down, lying on the couch again, and let the gentle swipes of their tongues brush away his admittedly tenuous irritation.

They kissed a few more times before she started laughing again, too much and too actively to kiss through, and he threw her a questioning glance.

“Sorry,” she said, not sorry at all. “It’s just, you totally owe me like ten thousand bucks.”

“What? No I don’t. Are you trying to charge me for breathing again? That only worked the one time.”

She lifted herself off him a bit and pointed at her sweater. Because of the dark and the cavalcade of emotions he’d gone through, he hadn’t actually gotten a good look at what she’d been wearing. He knew it was a sweater (she was always wearing a sweater, plus he was pretty sure his fingers clawed straight through it earlier), but he saw that the specific one she had donned was the one from few weeks ago, only now it was finished. The words ‘Free Hugs\* and Kisses\*\*’ were written on the chest, and he could only guess at the cost behind that second asterisk. Probably ten thousand dollars.

She was really intent on keeping him annoyed, huh? “Aagh, you were wearing that the whole time?! How did you know we were gonna kiss today?!”

“I always come prepared, Dipdop. I’ve got like two other sweaters underneath this one for different situations. You could learn a thing or two from me.”

He rolled his eyes. “Weren’t you supposed to give me an exemption anyway?”

“Well, mysterious stranger, I gave an exemption to my amazing, adorable brobro, but I still haven’t confirmed if you’re him.”

“Oh? Well, would your brother do THIS?”

He wrapped his arm around her waist and flipped them over, feeling almost smooth until he accidentally bopped her head against the sofa’s arm. She didn’t care, and let out a giddy high pitched squeal and words that might have been “I sure hope so,” four syllables in two breaths, and he let the scream and the phrase that followed it reverberate in his head as he pushed his lips back to hers.

For the rest of the night they laid there, planting long, lingering kisses on each other, kisses somewhere between their first tender one and the subsequent ravenous ones. They took breaks to giggle and stare, to rub noses and foreheads, and he’d pull her against him with the hand trapped between her and the sofa, and she’d run her fingers down the length



of his back. And when the laptop on the table turned itself off from disuse, its fan winding down, it cast them into a pleasant, warm darkness, and the sound of wet smacks filled the silence.

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Even later that night, Dipper found himself back under Mabel, under blankets, her head against his shoulder and her legs entwined with his. He felt the warmth of her slowing breaths against his chest, through his shirt, as she drifted off to sleep. She wasn't quite there, not yet, a thin thread of awareness still tied tightly around Dipper. She was probably waiting for his heartbeat to slow, to know he was drifting too, but something kept him wakeful. The day had been the best day in his life, but he wouldn't be Dipper if he didn't let the worries fester. The bounced around his head, not enough to ruin his night, but enough to make him speak them out loud.

"Hey, Mabels?"

"Hm." It was such a muted hum it could've been imagined.

"You... you know this isn't normal, right?"

"Mm-hmm." A hum just as quiet as the last.

"This is... probably unhealthy."

"Mm-hmm."

"Things could get pretty bad. For both of us."

"I know." It surprised him to hear words but they were spoken just as softly.

"Everything could change."

She nodded against his chest.

He almost thought she was ignoring what he was getting at before he figured her out for real, and he chuckled.

"You don't care, do you?"

"Not right now I don't."

A part of his mind told him that was such an irresponsible answer, but every other part told him not to listen. He wondered if something had invaded him again, because that wasn't how his mind usually worked, asking him not to worry, telling him not to care. If so, well, maybe he should give in to it, because the first 'invader' ended up giving him everything he'd ever wanted. So he let his worries dissolve, and focused on the feeling of Mabel's body against his as he slowly fell asleep. He supposed there was nothing wrong with living in the moment for a while.

## Epilogue

“So, I didn’t misunderstand right? You now own a sweater that tells everyone who looks at it you give free kisses to your twin brother?”

“... Heh, whoops. Didn’t really think about the optics on that one.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“Sure explains all those weird looks I got when I wore it out the other day!”

“MABEL!”

“Hah! Jay-kay brosef, jk. That sweater’s just for you.”

She kissed him (for free).